

California Fires

California wildfires lasted 19 days last October, destroyed more than 1,500 homes, killed nine people, and injured 85 others. Nearly 1,000 CC volunteers helped and comforted victims in Christ's name.

*Story by Carol Savage
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins*

Days after devastating wildfires burned through Southern California last October, volunteer Rick Roberts from Mission Valley Christian Fellowship sifted through the charred remains of what had been a beautiful home in a senior citizens' community in San Diego County. Watching hopefully at Rick's side, retiree George Chadwick Jr. still could not believe his home was gone. The fast-moving wildfire had engulfed only a handful of houses out of dozens in the sprawling community, leaving the majority untouched. Earlier, the elderly man had examined the burnt-out remains of the sedan owned by his wife, Joan.



George, left, watches as volunteer Rick Roberts of Mission Valley Christian Fellowship sifts ashes for valuables.

Nearby, Joan huddled with Ivette Cortes, a volunteer from Maranatha Chapel in San Diego, as they painstakingly searched for valuables that could be identified for insurance claims. Ivette patiently allowed Joan time to look over each piece, listening to each story of remembrance while other volunteers on the site sifted the debris through screens. Ivette had immediately felt a bond with the couple. "We felt like they were family, like we had known them for so long," Ivette said.

The crisis had come upon the Chadwicks unexpectedly. "They didn't have time to take anything with them," explained Ivette. Late last October, fires jumped from San Diego County's Witch Creek area to north-eastern Rancho Bernardo, the residential community in which the Chadwicks were living. Under an evacuation order for that 10-square-mile region, the Chadwicks fled their home in the pre-dawn hours. When they returned, Ivette shared, "There was nothing left of the house." It had burned completely to the ground.



George Chadwick Jr. observes his wife's burnt-out car.



Working in cooperation with Samaritan's Purse International Relief, volunteers from various Calvary fellowships assist George and Joan Chadwick in sifting through ashes and debris after their home was burned in October. Joan, center, describes where various parts of their former home stood.



Ivette Cortes, right, of Maranatha Chapel shows some recovered items to Joan.

Calvary volunteers sift methodically through ashes to salvage valuables or items that could be identified for insurance purposes.

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... We appreciate this very much.”**

George Chadwick Jr., homeowner

George had been following the progress of the regional wildfires via TV news. When he went to bed that night, the closest fires were still 10 miles away. Then, at around 4 a.m., a police car had driven down the street, and an officer with a bullhorn warned residents to leave their homes, as the fires were only a mile away. The Chadwicks drove to another area of San Diego to stay with their daughter. The next day, they learned that they had lost their home.

Although the Chadwicks knew that they had lost their home, returning to the site three days later was “very distressing,” George shared. “Everything was destroyed: family heirlooms and antiques, family pictures. You miss things as you go along.”

Realizing that the physical labor involved in the clean-up would be daunting for their elderly group of friends, the Chadwicks contacted Samaritan’s Purse International Relief—a ministry headed by Franklin Graham—for help. Maranatha Chapel served as a coordination center for Samaritan’s Purse volunteers.

George said of the volunteers, “They were well-trained and well-equipped. They were wearing masks, as the ash is very toxic. They were very methodical.”

The volunteers took turns helping the Chadwicks and other nearby homeowners sort through the remains of their residences,



Photo by Jon Rogers

The homeowner of this site asked volunteers to help him find his wedding ring. After prayer, the crew from Maranatha Chapel found the ring almost immediately.

which had been consumed in the blaze estimated by authorities to have exceeded 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit. Aluminum pans from the kitchen had melted into puddles.

Ivette testified that it was the power of prayer which enabled volunteers to complete their assignment. During the first part of the clean-up, a hazardous situation arose when a still-active gas pipe caused a small explosion. For the safety of the volunteers, relief efforts were suspended until the pipe could be shut off.

The believers prayed openly and specifically that the Lord would help with the situation. Soon afterward, a local utilities truck arrived on the scene and cut the gas supply to the site, enabling the volunteers to continue. According to Ivette, she and the rest of the group shoveled slowly through the white ash while on their knees. The team found coins that were important to the couple, George’s high school class ring, and some pieces from Joan’s grandmother’s china set.

Although most of their material possessions were destroyed, the Chadwicks were grateful to be alive and were glad to receive the few trinkets and jewelry found in the rubble. Neighbors watched curiously as the team spent their day helping.

At the end of that day, the volunteers and the Chadwicks gathered in a circle to pray. They asked the Lord for strength during the time of recovery and for peace of mind. The elderly couple was presented a Bible that had been signed by all the volunteers. George responded, “We appreciate this very much.” Rick Roberts, the leader of the volunteer team, came away saying that he had a fresh perspective of the grace of God and the need to be thankful for His provision.

Rick commented, “Even though the fire did not touch me or my family personally, I felt how much we take God’s blessings for granted. I realize how blessed I am to be



Homeowner Ed Phillips of San Diego holds a picture of his home engulfed in flames. In the background, Calvary volunteers finish their work at the homesite.



George and Joan Chadwick are presented with a Bible by team leader Rick Roberts.

physically able to be in a position to help others who were affected.”

Horizon Christian Fellowship, a Calvary Chapel-affiliated church in San Diego, had mobilized 20 volunteers almost immediately—the “day after the fire crossed the mountains,” said Garrett Graupner, director of Festivals of Life for Horizon and a Red Cross chaplain. Garrett estimated that nearly 1,000 volunteers—mainly from CC-affiliated churches in Southern California—assisted in the fire relief ministry, ministering to hundreds of families.

“People were extremely grateful. ... Many were coming up asking for Bibles and/or

for prayer—people who didn’t know Jesus,” Garrett said. “It was a fresh opportunity for people to see Christ’s love being demonstrated and influencing families throughout the community.”

Horizon’s Food Service Director John Little and other believers came alongside emergency workers by providing food for fire and police personnel. They also supplied more than 10,000 meals—as well as shower facilities and towels—for displaced families and individuals. The Gospel was shared through chaplains and a Christ-centered child-care service set up at a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) center.

The California wildfires in October lasted 19 days, spanning seven California counties and parts of Baja CA, Mexico. More than 1,500 homes were destroyed; nine people were killed; and 85 others (including 61 firefighters) were injured. Members of more than 346,000 households—more than half a million people—were ordered to evacuate. The two biggest, most damaging blazes were located in San Diego County.



Red areas show where fires destroyed homes in California last October.

Volunteers worked in other outlying areas through Calvary Chapel Relief, a ministry of CC La Habra, CA. A small team of believers from CC La Habra and other CCs spent six days ministering in Fallbrook and Palomar Mountain just after the fires. They provided nearly 4,000 meals, held church services, and prayed with several rescue workers, said Scott Crawford, who heads up the disaster relief ministry. After hearing the Gospel through the services and one-on-one at meal times, several firefighters prayed to receive Christ, recounted Scott. ☞

To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. Isaiah 61:3

Maranatha Chapel
www.maranathachapel.org
office@maranathachapel.org
 858-613-7800

**Horizon USA
 Emergency Management**
www.Horizonsd.org
etolentino@horizonsd.org
 858-277-4991

Calvary Chapel Relief
www.calvarychapelrelief.org
scott@calvarylahabra.org
 714-578-0414



Volunteers from various Calvary Chapel fellowships pray for the Chadwicks after helping sift through the remains of the elderly couple's home in San Diego, CA.



Volunteers gathered each morning at the Samaritan's Purse International Relief command center for devotions, prayer, and work assignments.